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# OUR CLAMORING ANCESTORS

BY AGNES LOUISE DEAN

MOST of my ancestors I like pretty well. It behooves me to mention them with respect, anyway (except those immediate to me), for the more remote they are, the more likely they are to be your ancestors, too. *Our* ancestors, then, pacing the deck of the Mayflower together, or the deck of the Ark, or the Neolithic twilight, in the person of a common progenitor!

As I say, I like my ancestors; but I do not understand them especially, and I often find them both unreasonable and disconcerting. They limit me and unsettle me for my environment.

I have speculated, to the point of brooding, on that cautious and stealthy ancestor of mine (I trust he is none of yours) who best attained whatever were his predatory and anti-social ends, in complete silence. His successes so went to his head, apparently, that he considered all sound noise, and all noise suppressible. He cut himself off from the self-expression of the tom-tom and the battle-cry; he taught his ears to shudder when crooned lullabies or rhythmic chastisement were forward in the cave nursery. He would never participate in, or serve as audience for, the neighborhood musicale, no matter how pretty the local talent, or how desperately the orchestra needed an extra sackbut.

He took his stand, and he wrote his will. And here am I, after many generations, with no cause to be furtive and absolutely nothing to conceal, having no sense of time, having no sense of tune, and admitting to an unreasoning misery in the presence of all Musicks. Other members of my family are made glad instead of mad by symphony and sonata. I can see that I am the sort of person who, without this ancestral hamper, would organize chamber music societies, and delight to play the violin. It is my family who are furtive: when they entertain musicians, it is I whom they seek to conceal.

Of all the ministers who leave their parish to the offices of a

"supply" while they post o'er land and ocean to preach elsewhere themselves, I have heard only one allege this reason: that he liked to sleep in a sleeping car. It was a need of his nature. It is also a need of mine, one at which my closest observers jeer, reconciling it ill with my predilection for sleeping-porches and clean hands.

"One must make sacrifices; one must make sacrifices," I reply, vaguely. Already I am in a trance of anticipation before the porter has tucked my suitcase beyond reach, or tendered me the crackling hat-bag. What do I like about sleeping cars? Oh, everything! The soot, and the horrible pillows, and the slabby blankets; the suffocating heat pouring up through plush crannies to meet the spatter of cold, cindery air from a dirty window-screen. There is a luxury of discomfort in settling-in that makes you vividly alive to the real merits of sleeping cars. The pulsing of the train beneath you relaxes every tension; the noise makes a dull, blurry chrysalis about the berth; the raised window-curtains show the spread of the firmament above the world in shadow; the train's motion is timed to the wheeling of the intimate stars. You drop to sleep conscious as nowhere else of turning with the axle of the world.

This conviction of security must be as ancestral as it is groundless. Statistics and common sense are against those who put their trust in Lower 9's. Common sense and statistics are against those who imagine their ancestors as patrons of prehistoric sleeping cars.

Well, I am willing to waive the technicality; provided that I am allowed to believe that the sleeping car ecstasy, so contrary to reason and one's habits, is an obscure heritage of the ages. I cannot pretend to know whether an ancestor of mine chose to lie on some high, starlit cliff beneath which the endless surf pounded, or whether his tribe worked out in nuances of jolts and suffocations a method of trial by ordeal. I only contend that they must have been busy at something of the sort, for me to count the communal whisk-broom an accolade, and the traces of black polish on my brown shoestrings the signet of an ever-precious experience.

There can have been no Californians among my ancestors. I

do not arrive on the Pacific Coast to celebrate a winter of inane content, as do the descendants of that bright lexicographer who gave to the world the word "climate". I do not mean to be stuffy about this, yet I am a little glad to come of stock which held itself justified in grumbling at its weather. It is hard, when all one's instincts in meteorology are critical, to deny the existence of drought during eight months, and of a curtain of rain for six monotonous weeks. It is still harder, after mastering this alien technique of denial, to become suddenly all emotion in the sunshine; to burst forth into abrupt trumpetings, as of Gideon's men, crying, "The Climate of the Lord, and of California!"

And yet a submerged ancestor of mine collaborated with California to give me one of my most saturated experiences of joy. Who could have predicted the rush with which my spirit was to meet the laughing color and just spacings of the courts and buildings of the Panama-Pacific?

Towns are not built like that in the pioneer country which my immediate ancestors helped to conquer. There the whispering forests of yesterday have been converted into the paved thoroughfares and clangorous transfer-points of to-day. Their poetry is the poetry of achievement; and their picturesqueness is the picturesqueness of speed. But "far away and long ago" in that strange, uncharted communism of ancestry, I must have had a claim on some reveler in color. His tremendous legacy came down, strictly entailed, to Jules Guerin, who, with acres for his canvas and the California sun for a medium, flung rhythmic orange flags against the blueness of sky, and caught the river of the wind in plantations of eucalyptus. Framed by a mellow arch, mirrored in the still and faithful lagoon, façade and vista repeated messages of color and light. Orange and gold and green, buff and mauve and turquoise, cloud shadows and the white swooping of gulls' wings . . . in the midst of which wandered a brown-clad tourist from the antipodes, arrogant and exultant, claiming all this unimagined glow and modulation and contrast as her own. Her birthright; terrifically hers.

And there's an ancestor for you! I like him better than the pussyfooter who cut me off cruelly from musical appreciations.

But am I to like that ancestor who is forever chasing me up

hills? Temperamentally I am fitted for enjoying hills only from the highroad. I belong really among those who with the Psalmist find it enough merely to lift up their eyes to the hills. Nature never constructed me for a mountaineer. I am short in all the specifications of a climber. I look and act and feel like a Ford car—but I get there. Not because I want to scramble, or grow purple. I hate being tired and out of breath. I hate being obviously a drag on the company. I dread most of all the ghastly moment of lightheadedness when the hill turns impalpable beneath me and I am left clinging to eternity by a handful of checkerberry leaves and a root of laurel.

Yet even at this discouraging point my hill ancestor deserts me not. "Just rest a bit; for," says he, "the afternoon light across the valley is getting better right along. You'll be awfully glad you came, when you get to the tip-top!"

And, indeed, my ancestor is trustworthy enough in this. But I should never listen to him at the hill's base. His urge is the urge that evolves aviators, I suppose; meanwhile, it is making a wreck of me.

As a descendant, I cherish another grudge against the past, this time directed at whoever disqualifies me for pleasure in the family—or dinner—argument. I picture him as an Egyptian of a late dynasty, for whom everything was settled before time was. Some things are still important to him, but animation is not one of them. He takes no little pains in the adjustment of his head-dress and in conventionalizing his attitudes. The carved gods themselves could not improve on his Oxford manner.

I am always aware that it is he looking out of my eyes when the breeze of emotion blows upon the sea of discussion. How can I follow the question at issue with that deprecating mummy inside me? He will not let anyone put more than sixty pounds' pressure on the words, "Quite the contrary," or, "If you will only *think* for a minute." He does not like anyone to dart in with a happy instance, handling it with the concentration and fury of a carpet-sweeper, thereby barking the shins of the opposition. I have often told him that the opposition does not mind its shins—that he is just making me miserable for nothing. Indeed, the opposition seems palpitantly capable of accomplishing its own

warfare, but it demands heat for the forging of its weapons. Except for this wet-blanket ancestor, I, too, would be fighting with calories for logic, and with that fervent sense of victory which each party to an argument enjoys. As things are, I am the only one conscious of defeat when the reverberation dies away. All the others have been stimulated. Further, they have been reassured as to the clarity of their conceptions, and persuaded of their real flair for vigorous statement.

In practical matters, the ancestral bias again shows items of profit and items of loss. So far as I can tell, I never had an ancestor who could compute the number of street-car fares in a dollar. Or if I had, he hugged his secret to him and bore it with him across the Styx. I am not recompensed for financial helplessness, so unbecoming in a town dweller, by, for instance, an unmarketable capacity with horses. If I were of a different century and another sex, I might be greatly sought after as a jockey. But who, chiding me for my stupidities in counting change, cares about my native talent for riding?

It is all very mixed, and throws a heavy burden upon Environment. One's immediate Heredity may be a great help in the modeling of one's nose and in one's grounding in the Ten Commandments. But the impulses and tastes which make us distinguishable from our sisters and our cousins and our aunts seem to come to us in insured parcels often from the farthest zones of race consciousness. And we pay the postage at this end of the route.

AGNES LOUISE DEAN.